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The Man Who Knew Kootenai Brown

Did I know Kootenai Brown?

Well "ra-ther," as Kootenai himself would say--knowed him for fifty years--for fifty-one to be exact.

Why, once upon a time, Kootenai and me was pardners, and a straighter shooter or a better scout, I never want to know.

Here, draw your chair up closer to the fire, and I'll tell you all about him.

How'd he get his name, did you say?

Why, from the Kootenai Indians. He traded with 'em and spoke their lingo like a native. "John George" was his real name, but "Kootenai"was the only one we knowed him by, and the only one he ever got from the folks of Southern Alberta.

Where was he born? He told me once, but I'll be dinged if I kin remember whether it was England or Ireland. I'm gittin' on, you know, and sometimes I find myself a-slippin'. I seem to have heered, though, that he was eddicated at Eton and Oxford, and then went out to India.

For some reason unbeknown'st to me, he left India for South America. Then, in 1862, he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and journeyed northward along the Pacific Coast.

On reachin' Victoria he heerd of the gold strike in Cariboo, and come inland with a party of Yankee prospectors. He was lucky and in two years had made a fortune. Then he lost it, and in 1865 he packed through South Kootenai Pass to Wild Horse Crick—Fort Steele, as they call it now.

That's where I first met Kootenai. He was a likeable chap, though mighty quick-tempered, and when he suggested my joinin' up with him, I did. With three others we staked a claim. It didn't pan out well, so we sold it to some Chinamen for a hundred dollars apiece.

The five of us then trekked through the Pass to the Saskatchewan River where, we heered there was some gold diggin'. We struck the river at Seven Persons Crick near what is now the city of Medicine Hat.

I guess none of us ever forgot that trip, for, as we come through the pass into the open, we got our first view of buffalo. There must have been thousands of 'em. The hull prairie ~~was~~ as far as we could see was jest one livin' movin' mass of bellerin' buffalo.

But that trip is worth rememberin' for another reason. ~~Comin'~~

Comin' down the trail from the Pass, we reached the border of a lake where, on the ferther shore, a big mountain raised its head to the clouds. It was one of the Kootenai Lakes, or Waterton Lakes, as they call 'em now, located in the present Waterton Lakes National Park.

We all had to admit it was a right pretty scene, but Kootenai couldn't get over it. He jest stood still fer awhile, and then said in a low voice: "This is what I have seen in my dreams. This is the country fer me."

Of course all this country was Blackfoot territory then, and there wasn't a farm or a ranch anywhere. The only two white men this side of Edmonton was Father Lacombe and Jean La Herius who wandered up and down among the Crees and Blackfeet. Calgary, at that time, had not been thought of; neether had Macleod or Medicine Hat.

Naturally we expected trouble with the Blackfeet should we meet up with 'em-and that's exactly what happened soon after we left Seven Persons Crick. We had been travellin' in a north-easterly direction, headin' for Edmonton, and had stopped at a little clump of cottonwoods to eat.

All of a sudden, a flight of arrows passed over our heads, and we jumped to our feet and started shootin' at the Indians from behind the cottonwoods.

It was then that Kootenai got an arrow in the small of his back, and it's a wonder to me he wasn't killed. He asked me to pull it out--an arrowhead two and a half inches long, completely buried from sight.

As I pulled it out, the jagged edges tore his flesh, but Kootenai only ~~gave~~ give a low groan. Luckily, he had a bottle of turpentine in his pack, and I poured half the contents into the open wound. That was the only doctorin' he got, but in a few days he was as active and chipper as ever.

We was usin' old muzzle loaders, with balls and caps, and in about twenty minutes we had killed two of the Indians. The rest of 'em rode off and swum their horses across the Saskatchewan.

It was jest after our brush with the Blackfeet that our party of five split up. Kootenai, as I told you before, was mighty quick-tempered, and I guess his wound was hurtin' him some.

Anyway, he said we was goin' in the wrong direction, and he aimed to steer another course. I kind of felt sorry for him, so I said I believed he was right. The other three wouldn't give in, and in a few minutes they was swimmin' their horses across the river where the Black-

feet had crossed half an hour before.

Kootenai and me decided to follow the Saskatchewan which would bring us out, we thought, somewhere in the neighborhood of Fort Garry.

Well, we pushed on, but it was a long, hard trip. Sometimes we had to make a detour for miles to get clear of bad lands, and coulees, and steep cut-banks that our horses could not climb.

The supplies we had toted from Wild Horse Crick was nearly gone, and we had to depend on our muzzle loaders for game. Luckily there was plenty of it. Besides buffalo there was elk and antelope and jack-rabbits by the thousand. Grouse, which we then called sagehens, lived in the brush and some of them was as big as young turkeys.

There was no bread, because in the hull of the West there was no flour, and only when we reached one of the older settlements did we ever taste vegetables. It was meat, meat, meat all the time.

Well, we followed the south branch of the Saskatchewan as fer as Duck Lake, reachin' that little half-breed settlement some time in the Fall. The men was good hunters and it didn't take much persuadin' on their part to make us stay the winter with 'em. Kootenai and me had our horses still, so durin' the cold weather we made a sleigh to carry us to Fort Garry.

We set out early in the Spring, drivin' through the Touchwood Hills and Whitemud River to Portage La Prairie, and then on to Red River. It took us six weeks' steady drivin', and as the weather turned warmer, we was plum skeered that the snow would leave us with our runners on bare ground. We made it all right, but both of us was mighty glad of a good week's rest.

Not quite knowin' what to do next, we went back to Portage and started tradin' with the Indians. Kootenai, I could see, was gittin' restless—he couldn't stand the flat prairie—so I wasn't at all surprised when he up and told me one mornin' that he was off to the States.

Though hatin' to see him go, I seen it was no use tryin' to stop him fer—to use his own words—"the wanderlust was on him and would not be denied." I didn't offer to go with him this time because you see—well, the fact is I had got kinda sweet on a little gal in Portage, and I couldn't bear to leave her.

After that, I didn't hear of Kootenai fer a long time. Then, one day, I got a letter from him. After wanderin' through the Western States he had married a French half-breed girl, and had taken her back with him to the Waterton Lakes. He said he had set up a tradin' post

there and was doin' well. If I was ever out that way, he wrote, I must come and see him.

Did I ever git to visit him? I shorely did, but not till years later. You see I was doin' pretty well at Portage. I had married the little gal I spoke of, and it wasn't till my family had grown up and begun to scatter that I could get away. Then, my oldest boy who'd always been crazy about ranchin' too up a homestead east of Calgary and Ma and me come out to keep house for him. That was back in 1915, and we've been there ever sence.

It was that first summer than I met Kootenai agin. One evenin' my boy suggested that we all take a holiday, and next mornin' we was on the way to Waterton Lakes Park. We drove all day, and jest as the sun was settin', I got my first glimpse of the lake. It was as pretty as ever, and a big hotel had sprung up on its banks to accomodate the thousands of sightseers who visit it every year.

It was late the next afternoon before I got a chance to look up my old friend Kootenai. He was Park Warden now, and his cabin stood a little back from the lake. I knocked at the door, and Kootenai opened it himself.

He jest took one look at me, and then put out his hand: "Come in, old pardner," he said, "Come in and welcome. It's fifty years since we camped on this very spot, but the scene has not changed, though, truth to tell, it changes every minute." And then he quoted--Shakespeare I think: "'Age cannot wither, or custom stale

Its infinite variety.'"

Next to Nature, Kootenai loved books, and the walls of his cabin was lined with 'em, Shakespeare, Milton and all the rest--classics, every durned one of 'em.

Jest then, his wife come in--his first wife had died, and he had got married agin--this time to a Cree woman called "Chee-pay-tha-qua-ka-soon." That means "the Blue Flash of Lightning," but Kootenai's pet name for her was "Neech-a-moose"--My Loved One. A fine woman she was, too, and in a few minutes I was settin' down to one of the best meals I ever et.

Supper over, Kootenai and me lit our pipes, and talked like all git out. The sight of me had made my old pardner kind of reminiscent, I guess, and he told me all about his trip through the States. He said he spent several months Indian fightin' under General Custer jest before the Big Horn Massacre.

Then he hired as a deck-hand on a Mississippi steamer and had a little fracas with a Spaniard—one of the crew. The Spaniard made for him with a knife, and Kootenai shot him dead.

After that, he said, he had come back to the Lakes, and settled down, though when the Rebellion of 1885 broke out he had served as a scout with the Rocky Mountain Rangers. Since then he had found his chief excitement in actin' as guide to big game huntin' parties, but now he felt, he was gittin' too old for that.

"Yes," he said at partin', "I'm gittin' on, Old Pard, and sometimes it makes me sad to think that one of these days I'll have to leave all this—the lakes, the mountains, and the blue sky archin' overhead. I've wandered far in my time, but never in all my wanderin's have I looked upon a fairer scene. As my favorite poet, Wordsworth, puts it:

"' Earth hath not anything to show more fair.'"

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Well sir, I've allus felt kinda glad I made that visit to Kootenai when I did. He died the next year, and I never seen him agin.

I've been out to the Park a few times sence, and the last thing I allus do is to visit his grave.

With Old Chief Mountain lookin' down upon it, and the waters of the lake he loved lappin' the shore at its foot, I kneel down beside it and say—jest as if Itwas sayin' a prayer—

"Good-bye, Kootenai, Old Pard, — Old Friend, Goodbye!"

And, do you know, I believe he hears me!

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Kootenai was a believer in what they call the "transmigration of souls", and allus said that when he died he'd come back to the Lakes in the form of a wolf.

I don't profess to know anything about it, but I kin tell you this. Every time I've said them words over his grave I've heerd a wolf howl.

Now what do you make of that? Could it be Kootenai, do you think?

I wonder! I— wonder!

Arthur Brown